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ABSTRACT

This document deals with nurturing creativity in the culturally different. It begins by pointing out that every person has a unique set of experiences and could therefore be considered "culturally different". The same methods are used to encourage creativity in those commonly labelled "culturally different" as are used with any individual. If activities are to catch the interest and imaginations of a divergent group of young people, they must both appear relevant to the students and get the students involved in the learning process. Some activities that accomplish these things are suggested. They include the use of music, art, poetry, teacher- and student-made materials, puzzles, cooking, and field trips. A game to get people thinking about differences and likenesses between people is also described. (DDO)

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# CREATIVITY AND THE CULTURALLY DIFFERENT

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Not long ago one heard a lot about the Disadvantaged. Today we talk about the Culturally Different. In a society trying to overcome the effects of hundreds of years of hatred, prejudice, and inequality, it has become dangerous to joke about ethnic differences, unthinkable to use derogatory labels. Since the term Disadvantaged has negative connotations, we hesitate to label people as being Disadvantaged, the have-nots of our society. Instead we use the euphemism Culturally Different, seeking to use a bias-free descriptor rather than the value-laden term Disadvantaged.

Who are the Culturally Different? Usually the term is used to label those whose cultural backgrounds are dissimilar to those of the mainstream of white middle America, the minority groups in our midst -- Black Americans, Spanish Americans, Indian Americans, etc. However, if we want to be precise, then every individual can be labeled as culturally different from every other individual. Just as each person in a given family experiences family life from a different perspective (that of the oldest child, middle child, youngest child, father, mother, grandparent, etc.), just so the transmission of a person's cultural heritage is received and internalized by each individual in a society within the framework of his own unique experiential background. No two people are exactly alike, nor do they perceive themselves or their worlds alike, thus everyone might be described as culturally different.

While schools have long assumed partial responsibility for the transmission of the American cultural heritage, the unique individuals within any one classroom perceive, internalize, and utilize that transmitted knowledge in diverse ways. True, knowledge is transmitted, but each individual makes it uniquely his own.

Not only is it impossible to transplant knowledge, unaltered by individual perception, from one human mind to another, but it is probably undesirable to do so. What is needed is not a commonality of knowledge or cultural heritage, but an understanding and appreciation of diversity. At one time the melting-pot vision of American culture was a viable model, necessary for the survival of a weak nation settled by a menagerie of outcasts, discontents, and adventurers. Economic and political strength have negated the necessity for the melting-pot concept. Today we are free to recognize and value ethnic differences within our culture. The problem is to overcome historical barriers and prejudices, replacing them with understanding and appreciation. Man must come to value man for his uniqueness, for what he is, not who he is. A beginning step in this direction is to recognize and accept cultural differences. If we find another person or group culturally different from ourselves, then we must recognize the fact that those we have defined as culturally different from ourselves probably would, in turn, define us as such. Cultural difference is a two-way street. One cannot be Culturally Different in isolation.

Too often we concentrate on what is different about cultures rather than focusing on commonalities. All men share many of the same strengths and weaknesses, the same dreams, the same gifts and talents. Common to all cultures is the desire to create, to be creative. Individuals in all cultures possess varying degrees

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of those traits we identify as characteristic of the creative person -- curiosity, flexibility, originality, fluency, independence, sensitivity to problems, assertiveness, self-direction, the ability to see the unusual, to elaborate. From all cultural backgrounds come those individualists who shun conformity, who hear a different drummer.

How does the teacher nurture creativity in the culturally different? Just as one would in any individual -- respect him for the person he is, not the person you want him to be. Understand, appreciate, support differences. Reject conformity for conformity's sake. Refuse to play the authoritarian teacher role. Teach people, not subjects. Cherish the individual.

Teachers don't much like creative people, you know. Research shows teachers prefer the genial conformist to the non-conformer. Everyone must do the homework assignment. Everybody line up for recess. Let's all take out our social studies books. Now everyone do his own work. While teachers mouth the desirability of individualization, they practice and reward group conformity.

Valuing a person's individuality is vital to all students, but it is imperative for the student we label as Culturally Different. How else can he come to value himself and his heritage unless we as teachers show him, through our actions, that he is valuable? Unless we accept and encourage his unique contributions?

Those minority groups that the majority label as culturally different cannot survive and thrive in a classroom rigged in favor of the majority. If every individual in a classroom is to stretch to the very limits of his potential, then diversity must be accepted, even encouraged in the classroom. Students must be allowed to reach for their own goals as well as those of society. The teacher must both model accepting attitudes and behaviors, and directly teach for understanding and acceptance among children with diverse cultural backgrounds.

What sorts of classroom activities provide opportunity for diverse individuals to learn, to cooperate, to grow? If activities are to catch the interest and imaginations of a divergent group of young people, then they must both appear relevant to the student and they must get the student involved in the learning process. Education is not something teachers teach students. Students learn, thus acquiring an education. Teachers can only set the stage, facilitate the students' learning process, and then step back and let 'em learn.

The child who perceives himself as different is too concerned with his "me-ness" to attend to learning. When working with the Culturally Different, the teacher's first concern must be to make differences acceptable. When a group of students come to understand, accept, and appreciate the differences they represent, then individuals are valued for what they are, for what they can contribute to the group. Then the individual can attend to his personal learning needs.

Once the student is ready to attend to his learning needs, then he must be given opportunity to assume some responsibility for his own education. If he is to do this willingly, then he must be able to engage in activities that are meaningful to him. He must acquire skills he can apply in his daily life. Students are turned off, and justifiably so, by the rote memorization type of learning that has long dominated the classroom scene. Why memorize presidents' names or state capitals? What are reference books for anyway? Who ever went to a party and held everybody spellbound while they recited the names of every president from Washington to Nixon?

Do you really need to remember what the capitol of Idaho is to go there? You can always look at the map, can't you?

Students want and need practical skills -- how to figure interest, what to look for in a contract, how to calculate price per unit. They must learn to think logically, not merely parrot ready-made answers. With a shortening work week and earlier retirement ages, the use of leisure time becomes ever more important. With burgeoning food prices, cheap, practical ways to good nutrition are a necessity.

Never has it been more evident than during the recent Congressional investigation of the Watergate incident how important it is that men think for themselves, that they examine decisions in light of their personal ethics rather than act blindly or expediently. If we are to produce ethical, thinking people, then we must encourage thought and value clarification in the classroom. We must accept divergent thought and action. We must foster creativity and individualism.

Teachers, you can't have your cake and eat it, too. If we want adults who think, who fear not to make a decision and then stand by it, popular or not, then we must accept non-conformity in the classroom. The classroom must become a place to think, to create, to live, not a place where a group of students act in unison and acquiesce to the undisputed authority of the teacher.

There are those who proclaim such a classroom would produce chaos, that it is synonymous with lack of discipline. I believe that in today's world imposing traditional classroom standards on students spells disaster one way or another. If they conform, then we produce non-thinking automatons who can be ordered to do anything. Shades of Hitler!

Most likely today's youth will refuse to conform, but will rebel, some openly, some in insidious ways -- homework undone, disruptive behavior in the classroom, inattention, vandalism. Schools must change if we are to survive. The creative potential of every individual must be realized, not just that of white middle America. Cultural differences must be valued. Individualism must be encouraged. The innate worth of each individual must be valued by all. Energy must be channeled into productiveness, not destructiveness. Only as we come to accept one another as differing, yet valuable human beings, can we come together to work, to play, to create, to achieve the good life -- a good life shared by all.

## SUGGESTED CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Music and poetry that students consider relevant can be used as vehicles for classroom learning. Value clarification, social learning, reading, language development, mathematics activities -- all sorts of traditional classroom tasks can be accomplished through work with media and student-chosen material. Work can be individual, small or large group cooperative efforts.

As an example, consider the recording, "B lack and White," from the LP "Seven Separate Fools," D. Arkin/ E. Robinson. This song could lead to discussion and value clarification, certainly, and contains great opportunity for consideration of national and international problems and issues. Students could prepare booklets to illustrate the music, overhead transparencies, or slides. Perhaps a mural

could be done. The music provides the vehicle as well as an aesthetic experience.

Transparencies and slides may be made using clear contact paper, which runs about 49¢ a yard at department or hardware stores. It is 18" wide. Use only clay-based paper. You may determine if paper is clay-based by rubbing a wet finger over it. If a whiteish substance rubs off, you can make a color-lift from the paper. Such magazines as the old Life, McCalls, Ladies Home Journal, Playboy, Newsweek, and Woman's Day are clay-based. Apply contact paper directly to the picture you wish to lift. Place it then in a pan of water. In just a moment or two the paper will loosen, enabling you to pull the paper off the contact paper. The ink will adhere to the contact paper. Rub the contact paper with your finger, taking care to wash off all the clay remaining on your color-lift. Let the contact paper dry, then cover the inked side with another piece of contact paper or spray it with a fixatif. This will preserve your transparency or slide. Very small pictures must be used for slides, of course. You may obtain slide mounts quite inexpensively from photography shops, or make your own with poster board. File cards may be used, but they will buckle unless pressed. They are sufficient for current materials that will not receive a lot of use or need preserved.

Use materials that require students to think. Puzzles are an excellent means of doing this. Activities found in Elementary Science Study's Tangrams and Attribute Blocks (Webster Division of McGraw Hill) are excellent. Crossword puzzles, student-made puzzles and games are great. For student made materials, I would suggest baggies (the kind that "zip" shut) rather than lamination or contact paper. The student makes his puzzle on cardboard (or paper that is then taped to cardboard), this is slipped in the baggie, and then fellow students can work the puzzle with crayon or felttip pen, then erase their work with a tissue, thus allowing several people to enjoy the same puzzle.

Provide immediate reinforcement, allowing students to <u>know</u> when they are correct. Self-checking demonstrates the teacher's faith in the student, as well as providing for immediate feedback.

Take students out of the classroom directly to the source. Visit factories, city offices, businesses. Bring in people who know something about things the students are studying. Utilize parents, the community.

Eat. Every student loves to eat. Cook and learn. Eat for fun, eat to learn, eat to understand. Encourage students to share their food heritages. Eat cultural!

Create. Art and music are too often neglected so the students are sure to "get the basics." There's something pretty basic about man's enjoyment of the arts. Just as adults exchange information over the bridge table, the dinner table, a drink at the corner establishment, just so students can discuss earth-shaking topics as they paint, strum a guitar, or decorate the gym for an upcoming dance. Too long separation of education and fun has hampered the learning process. Take advantage of interests, hobbies, talents. Create and learn.

Come to know one another. From knowledge comes understanding and acceptance. Live in the classroom in an informal setting where dreams and ideas can be safely shared, where you can really talk about what you're thinking. Get into one another, as the kids say.

A good activity to get people to thinking about the differences and likenesses in people is the Friend Game. Bring in a bag of potatoes. Ask your students if they've ever paid much attention to a potato. Seek to elicit from them that they've always pretty much considered one potato like another -- if you've seen one, you've seen 'em all. Then tell them that you're going to give them each a "friend." Get acquainted with their friend. They'll probably horse around a lot. Let them. Then put them in small groups -- eight or ten people. Seat them in a circle, and have each person "introduce" his friend to the group. After this, collect all of their "friends," mix them up, and then have each person in the group find his potato. In my experience, this won't be all that difficult. You can follow this activity by talking about how alike, yet how different people are, too. The following day try lemons. They're harder. How about an egg? Are there differences in eggs? Try it.

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